

A Traditionalist Sunnī View on a Modernist Approach to the Qur'an -

The Case of Farid Esack's "*The Qur'an: A Beginner's Guide*"

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Abstract

This paper is an effort at lending a Traditionalist Sunnī perspective on the book *The Qur'an: A Beginner's Guide* (which the paper will refer to as “the book” for conciseness). While the intended audience of the book is far wider than Muslims, and while it in many ways effectively elucidates an otherwise complex subject matter to “Beginners”, the book of necessity touches on Traditional Muslim beliefs in regards the Qur’ān and related matters. The author has stated his attempt to maintain academic objectivity. As such, traditional Muslim beliefs may be seen as being portrayed as less than completely valid. This paper offers a limited response to the book from a Traditionalist Sunnī perspective. It also offers a critique on certain dimensions which are not from a specific theological angle (e.g. unnamed sources in the book). The book itself is examined, and commented upon using western academic sources (e.g., in regards translations) and Sunnī sources (e.g., where the book mentions a Sunnī belief and this requires clarification).

Keywords: Sunnī, Qur’ān

1. Introduction

The Qur'an: A Beginner's Guide (hereinafter “*A Beginners Guide*”) is a book which has made an impact on 21st century scholarship. On the one hand, it has gained academic acceptance to the extent of being used as a textbook in many international tertiary institutions, while on the other hand, it has been written in a manner that lives up to its title and is understandable to the beginner. Its parentage is firmly placed in the ancient genre of ‘*Ulūm ‘al-Qurān* – the Qur’anic Sciences. At the same time, the author attempts to balance his Islamic upbringing with academic objectivity. In so doing, the book is a blend of an ancient traditional genre with new outlook – an outlook which the traditionalist might describe as “modernist”. This paper, from a traditionalist Sunnī perspective will attempt a limited review of the aforementioned book under the following four broad themes: 1) The Clarity and Attribution of Statements or Lack Thereof – terms such as “some” “it has been suggested” etc. has been frequently used. This paper attempts to highlight such unclear statements, and where possible, clarify, identify and reference the unnamed entities. 2) Attenuations – certain facts may require revision and/or attenuation. Examples will be shown and discussed. 3) Nuance - from a traditional Sunnī perspective, certain passages may seem to be nuanced as to downplay the value of Sunnī views. 4) Critique – critical suggestions might be offered in regards certain dimensions of the book without necessarily delving into sectarian polemic. The primary reference is *The Qur'an: A Beginner's Guide* itself which will be examined under the above themes. Secondary sources will be the sources the book cites, e.g. ‘*al-‘Itqān*; and then academic sources (such as Lane) and Sunnī sources as required.

2. A brief Introduction to the Author

Whatever one’s view of Farid Esack (b. 1959) may be, his academic stature cannot be denied.

Esack completed a PhD at the University of Birmingham in 1990 and has since been based at Philosophische Theologische Hochschule, Sankt Georgen, Frankfurt am Main; Auburn Theological Seminary, New York; Ohio State University, Athens, Ohio; Harvard Divinity School; and is at present a professor in the Study of Islam at the University of Johannesburg. (Vahed, 2012:116-17)

One of his notable works is the book under discussion, *The Qur'an: A Beginner's Guide*. Some have given it glowing reviews, such as the first review on Amazon.com.:

"Extremely learned yet accessible, with fascinating insights on virtually every page. Especially useful for those new to the study of Islam, or newly interested in their inherited Islam...." (Sonn,, n.d.)¹

On the other hand, others, such as Timothy Winter², describe Esack's works as, "contradictory", "worrying", "odd" and "puzzling" (Winter, 2013).

If these academics have such conflicting views on his work, it may be useful to examine the contents of one such work, *The Qur'an: A Beginners Guide* to further shed light on the differences.

3. The Introductory Typology

A Beginners Guide, begins by describing a typology of approaches to the Qur'an, dividing the participants into six categories (Esack 2009: 1-10). It would thus be appropriate to commence with this typology. It will be discussed under the following three headings:

- 1) The binary approach that omits groups.
- 2) The sharp delineations that ignore nuances.
- 3) The appropriateness, or otherwise, of the sensual metaphor.

3.1. Inspiration and Focus

The typology is based on metaphor, and cites Kenneth Cragg (d. 2012) and Fazlur Rahman (d. 1988) as prior users of such metaphors. The other metaphors mentioned in the book, relate to brocade, pearls, etc., and focus primarily on the text of the Qur'ān itself, whereas Fazlur Rahman and Esack shift the focus to the reader of the Qur'ān. The brocade metaphor for example, amplifies the beauty of the Qur'ān, irrespective of who reads or not. The "invader" and the "lover", however, have existences of their own, separate from the text of the Qur'ān. In the use of analogy, at least in these cases, these two scholars do not focus on the text itself, but on the reader who approaches the Qur'ān (Esack 2009:1).

¹ "Tamara Sonn is the Hamad Bin Khalifa Al-Thani Professor in the History of Islam at Georgetown University's School of Foreign Service and an expert on Islamic intellectual history. She has published numerous books." (Georgetown University Website, n.d.).

² Winter is the Shaykh Zayed Lecturer in Islamic Studies. Director of Studies, Wolfson College. Dean, The Cambridge Muslim College

3.2. A Binary Module

Although the typology presents six main categories, it is essentially a binary division of participants into Muslims and those of other persuasions, labelled in the book as “*ummah*” and “world” respectively. In practice, the world might not fit so neatly into a binary module. There should be space for a third qualification, if at least for the purpose of discussion, and not for dogma. For example, unfulfilled non-Muslims, who are searching for spiritual truth, may also study the Qur’ān. They are not yet Muslims, but may be disillusioned with the faith of their upbringing. Such participants are not accounted for in a strongly defined binary module.

Conversely there are disillusioned Muslims who have questions about Islam and its foundational text, the Qur’an. They may examine the Qur’ān to assuage their doubts, whether successfully or not. Others who may have abandoned Islam may attempt to justify what they perceive as the Qur’ān’s deficiencies. These real and growing numbers do not fit in on either side of the horizontal line of the “*Ummah-world*” divide classification.

3.3. Discontinuous Sets vs. Continuum

Categorising people is not easy; people may not fit in neat discontinuities and a more nuanced typology, acknowledging the actuality of the continuum might be more realistic. The “uncritical lover” is not always sharply discontinued from the “scholarly lover”. The uncritical lover might absorb knowledge unconsciously (through sermons) and consciously (through reading the flood of literature available today). There are “scholarly lovers” who have a very superficial grounding in their studies, who are unable to translate or explain an *āyah*. There are uncritical lovers who may approach the scholar in a deeper academic and spiritual understanding of certain passages. The divisions between the categories are not as sharp as the typology portrays them to be.

The subset of scholarly lover includes anyone from the graduates of Islamic seminaries and Religion or Religious Studies at the academy, to celebrated *mufasssīrūn* (commentators) such as ‘Ismā‘īl ibn Kathīr (d.) and Muḥammad ‘al-Qurṭubī (d.). It seems problematic to sweep such divergent levels of accomplishment under the same subset, when the subsets are so strongly divided. This may have been avoided if the typology had considered the reality of continuum at the outset.

Moving the continuum to the next subset, the “critical lovers”, there is another “wall” of discontinuity. While an overall reading of the *Tafsīr* (Qur’ān commentaries) would not warrant labelling the *mufasssīrūn* (commentators) as “critical lovers”, there are nevertheless critical issues that the scholarly lovers have tackled. These may be issues that have been widely commented upon e.g., Lot offering his daughters, to more unique issues not addressed by all commentators, e.g., Jalālayn discussing whether the Prophet Muḥammad felt affection for Zaynab before their marriage (Al-Mahalli and Al-Suyuti, 1987). Conversely, the critical lover cannot be expected to be consistently critical with regard to every *āyah*. Given space constraints, further criticism of each “wall” of the typology is not viable for this paper.

3.4. Superfluous Sensuality

The typology uses a metaphor of a woman or “female body” for the Qur’ān. The “woman” is not restricted to a platonic relationship, but is involved in a relationship. Her female form is graphically praised in terms of her hair, nails, etc. (Esack 2009: 5). This form is not only viewed by her lover, but by “voyeurs” as well. The *Oxford Dictionary of Psychology* defines “voyeurism” as:

A paraphilia characterized by recurrent, intense sexual fantasies, urges, or behaviour involving the surreptitious observation of people who are naked (Colman 2003).

The value of “pearls” and “brocade” for the Qur’ān is understood. The sensuality of the implicitly sexual metaphor used in *A Beginner’s Guide* is superfluous and inappropriate for the sacred scripture.

4. Gathering of the Qur’ān

The fifth chapter of the book under discussion is titled, “Gathering of the Qur’ān”. On the first page mention is made of “several others” who agree with Muslim scholars that the “gathering” of the Qur’ān took place in three overlapping periods (Esack 2009: 93). It would be helpful to the reader if these “several others” are named. The holders of the contrary view, are also mentioned only as “others”. These “others” could easily have been identified. Gerhard Böwering declares the traditional Muslim view as a “minefield of chronological problems that are deeply rooted in the highly complex and contradictory evidence included in the Islamic tradition” (Böwering 2001:331). Böwering is, of course, not alone in this view. Others who hold similar views include Wansbrough, Cook, Crone, and Luxenberg (Reynolds 2009).

A Beginner’s Guide mentions two views on the topic of the gathering of the Qur’ān. However, a critical reading of its writing in terms of chosen content, choice of words and nuance, shows that in an effort to be neutral and objective, the argument which is presented, sways to the “critical” side and subtly adds credence to the second “anti-traditional” camp in the language that is employed. Note the usage of “Apparently the Prophet...” (2009:94), “seems to imply” (95), “is seen to be referring” (96) etc. Virtually every page contains language which casts aspersions on the Sunnī view. While the subject is said to be assessed “objectively” (94), the string of such nuanced wording indicates favour to one side. The book does not explicitly state this bias it is also at pains to present the argument as though neutral.

If the language is not sufficient to germinate doubt on the Muslim position, content or rather method of presenting the content, would fertilise the doubt further. For example, the incident of ‘Abdullāh bin ‘Abī Sarḥ is presented as “an interesting story relating to the transcription of revelation” (97). First, it seems strange that if the purpose was solely to narrate a story on transcription, that this potentially controversial story was particularly chosen for “*The Beginner’s Guide*”. Why? Second, the wording continues with the theme of doubt. ‘Abdullāh is “said to have exclaimed” while Muḥammad is “reported to have said.” Third, the story ends in a way which covers it in an unwarranted shroud of mystery:

He [‘Abdullāh bin ‘Abī Sarḥ] is said to have abandoned Islam and fled to Mecca where, according to some accounts, he re-embraced Islam when the city was taken over by the Prophet and according to others he died in a state of unbelief. (98).

It is almost as if the reader should understand that the Muslims are deliberately conspiring to cover up this incident. Again, these “some accounts” and “others” on both sides are left unnamed. No authorities and sources are cited. It is also difficult to believe that there could be a mystery on the fate of ‘Abdullāh, when he occupied such a senior post as governor of Egypt. (‘Asqalānī⁵ 2004, 1057-58). The *Encyclopaedia Britannica* confirms ‘Asqalānī’s information and adds further biographical details (1998)⁶. The compounding of doubt, in language, content and presentation on the Muslim narrative does not seem accidental and outweigh the slight nod to, “the Muslim view of a blessed coincidence between the word of God and that of a human being” (Esack 2009: 98). Critical impartiality and balance requires that some additional detail which the Muslim commentators offered be included to offset the overall atmosphere of doubt in the compilation of the Qur’ān.

5. The “Gone” Qur’ān

5.1. The “Gone” Qur’ān – Translation Issues

After presenting the gathering of the Qur’ān in a manner which subtly casts doubt on the traditional Muslim narration, as discussed above, a statement of the Companion, ‘Abdullāh ibn ‘Umar, is so placed (after the above mentioned issues) and so translated, that the beginner in Qur’ānic sciences is further plunged into doubt on the Muslim narrative:

‘Abd Allah ibn ‘Umar is reported to have said, “Let none of you say, ‘I have got the whole Qur’an.’ How does he know what all of it is? Much of the Qur’an has gone(*d-h-b*). Let him say, instead, ‘I have got much of what has survived’” (Suyuti, 1973, 3:72). (2009: 100)

The first and simpler issue to address is the veracity of the translation. Suyūṭī’s original Arabic text reads as follows:

قال أبو عبيد :حدثنا إسماعيل بن إبراهيم ، عن أيوب ، عن نافع ، عن ابن عمر ، قال : لا يقولن أحكم : قد أخذت القرآن كله ، وما يدريه ما كله ! قد ذهب منه قرآن كثير ، ولكن ليقل : قد أخذت منه ما ظهر (Suyūṭī 1999:662) .

The statement in a basic translation form (leaving certain words in Arabic for later discussion) can read, “Let none of you say, ‘I have أخذ - *a-kh-ḡ* the whole Qur’ān.’ What does he know what all of it is? Much *qur’ān* [recitation] has gone from it. Let him say instead, ‘I have أخذ - (*a-kh-ḡ*) what is ظهر (*zh-h-r*) of it.”

Contesting the above translation of أخذ - *a-kh-ḡ* may be rejected as needlessly pedantic. However, the nuance of translating it as “have got” augments the impression that the Muslims are wrong, that the Qur’ān that they “have got” with them is incomplete. They are hiding the truth. أخذ - (*a-kh-ḡ*) more plainly

⁵ “Shihāb al-Dīn Abu ‘l-Faḍl Aḥmad b. Nūr al-Dīn ‘Alī b. Muḥammad , Egyptian *Hadīth* scholar, judge, and historian (773-852/1372-1449), whose life work constitutes the final summation of the science of *Hadīth* and makes him one of the greatest and, at the same time, most typical representatives of Muslim religious scholarship” (Rosenthal, 2012).

⁶ “‘Abd Allāh ibn Sa’d ibn Abī Sarḥ, (d. 656), governor of Upper (southern) Egypt for the Muslim caliphate during the reign of ‘Uthmān (644–656) and the cofounder, with the future caliph Mu’āwiyah I, of the first Muslim navy, which seized Cyprus (647–649), Rhodes, and Cos (Dodecanese Islands) and defeated a Byzantine fleet off Alexandria in 652. He shared in the direction of the Muslim fleet that defeated the Byzantine navy in the battle of Dhāt aṣ-Ṣawārī, off the Lycian coast, in 655.” (<https://www.britannica.com/biography/Abd-Allah-ibn-Sad-ibn-Abi-Sarh>)

translates as “have taken” (Lane 1968: 28 and *Almaany* 2010). Esack has utilized the translation of Muhammad Asad” (2009: 13). While أَخَذَ *a-kh-z* appears in far too many forms in the Qur’ān to discuss here, it can be pointed out that Asad too translated it as “took” in Q. 2:92 and Q. 8:68 at the very least (Asad 1980).

“I have taken the whole Qur’ān” is not only a plain translation which is in line with the lexicons, but can be open to an interpretation which does not seek to debunk Muslim tradition (e.g., I have taken/learnt the entire Qur’ān from so-and-so), whereas “I have got the whole Qur’ān” leads the reader further down the tunnel of seeing the Muslim position as flawed. In other words, the suggestion is that the Muslims have “got” a Qur’ān in its final form which has something missing from it, as the compilation was flawed.

The second word which can be debated is “ظَهَرَ” (*zh-h-r*) which Esack translates as “what has survived” (Esack 2009: 100). *Almaany* not only gives the well-known meaning of “apparent, clear” but also “to learn” which ties in with the possible interpretation offered above. *Almaany* does not offer anything close to “what has survived” as a translation. Lane offers the following translations: “[It was, or became, outward, exterior, external, extrinsic, or exoteric: and hence,] it appeared; became apparent, overt, open, perceptible or perceived, manifest, plain, or evident” (1968: 1926). Lane’s translations do not contradict Muslim belief either. For to say that “I have taken what is manifest of the Qur’ān” and hence not what is abrogated and now hidden, is correct according to Muslims and has no implication that the Companions somehow erred in compiling the Qur’ān, leaving us with “what has survived”. Asad too translates ظَهَرَ *zh-h-r* as “open” in Q. 6:151 (Asad 1980): and its antonym as “secret” (ibid). In Q. 30:41 he translates ظَهَرَ *zh-h-r* as “has appeared” (ibid).

The above examples demonstrate the need for Esack to review his translation. It is not only a matter of the nuance seemingly slanted towards questioning Muslim belief, but improving the translation, which as is, does not seem to be the best choice of words.

5.2. The “Gone” Qur’ān – Decontextualizing Sources

After the reference to the “gone” Qur’ān narration (Esack 2009: 100), the narrative seems to continue to attempt to deconstruct the plausibility of the traditional Muslim position on the gathering of the Qur’ān by quoting Mohammed Arkoun, “Historically, it is difficult, if not impossible to assert how each reporter saw and heard the object of his report” (ibid). If two such authorities with Muslim sounding names, producing such a quote (after the context described before that) is insufficient to convince [the reader of] “*Beginner’s Guide*” that something is amiss in the Muslim position, the grounding of Muslim scholarship in qur’ānic sciences is [then] questioned, and all they can do is act “in a defensive manner” when the topic of the gathering of the Qur’ān is brought up; and that even for them (in other words, forget the laity) it is a struggle of faith to intellectually accept the Qur’ān as the word of God (101).

Although the book attempts to (“attempts to” or “claims to attempt to” examine issues objectively (94), quoting the narration of the “gone” Qur’ān without the context in which the author narrated it does not give the reader a full picture and understanding of its meaning.

The narration of 'Abdullāh bin 'Umar is recorded in Al-Suyūṭī's *'Al-Itqān fī 'Ulūm al-Qur'ān*.⁷ However, we cannot assume that everyone accessing the "*Beginner's Guide*" would have access to this book, or be able to decipher the Arabic. To Suyūṭī the narration is clear without any mysterious subtext of questioning the authenticity or the gathering process of the Qur'ān. He places the narration firmly under *naw'* 47 entitled "*An-Nāsikh wa 'al-Mansūkh*."⁸ This translates as "The Abrogating and the Abrogated" a topic which *A Beginner's Guide* only makes slight reference to 18 pages later (Esack 118) and on another five pages (151-3, 167). The gap between the narration and the later discussion on abrogation implies that Suyūṭī and Esack do not interpret the narration in the same manner. Nevertheless, as Suyūṭī is the quoted source, his original interpretation may be of relevance to the reader.

Here follows the relevant passage from Suyūṭī's work:

الضرب الثالث : ما نسخ تلاوته دون حكمه : وقد أورد بعضهم فيه سؤالاً وهو : ما الحكمة في رفع التلاوة مع بقاء الحكم ؟ وهل بقيت التلاوة ليجتمع العمل بحكمها وثواب تلاوتها ؟ وأجاب صاحب الفنون : بأن ذلك ليظهر به مقدار طاعة هذه الأمة في المسارعة إلى بذل النفوس بطريق الظن من غير استئصال لطلب طريق مقطوع به ، فيسرعون بأيسر شيء ، كما سارع الخليل إلى ذبح ولده بمنام ، والمنام أدنى طريق الوحي وأمثلة هذا الضرب كثيرة (Suyūṭī 1999:662) .

The third type [of abrogation] is that of the abrogation of its recitation, but not its ruling. Some have asked in regards this matter, "What is the wisdom of raising the recitation, but leaving the ruling? Why could the recitation not be left as well so that the praxis of the ruling may be combined with the divine reward of its recitation?" The Master of these fields has replied, "This is to manifest the extent of the obedience of this nation in hastening to spend their lives, even when the path is mentally deduced, without interrupting to seek a path that is clear cut to it. They thus hasten in even the lightest of matters. For example, the Friend [Abraham] hastened to slaughter his son by virtue of a dream, whereas dreams are the lowest form of revelation. " The examples of this kind are many....

It is at this point that Suyūṭī then produces the narration, the translation of which we can now revise based on Suyūṭī's own explanation, "Let none of you say, 'I have learnt the whole Qur'ān.' What does he know what all of it is? Much of the recitation of the Qur'ān has been abrogated. Let him say instead, 'I have learnt what is still manifest of it.'"

This narration should not be assumed to be a peculiarity of his, which others were afraid to consider. A range of Sunnī scholars mentioned and discussed it. For the purpose of brevity, this paper confines itself to quoting 'Aḥmad Ibn Ḥajar 'al-ʿAsqalānī:

⁷ "Jalāl al-Dīn Abū al-Faḍl 'Abd al-Raḥmān ibn Abī Bakr al-Suyūṭī, (born 1445, Cairo, Egypt—died October 17, 1505, Cairo), Egyptian writer and teacher whose works deal with a wide variety of subjects, the Islamic religious sciences predominating. Al-Suyūṭī's works number more than 500; many are mere booklets, and others are encyclopaedic.... He was coauthor of *Tafsīr al-Jalālayn* ('Commentary of the Two Jalāls'), a word-by-word commentary on the Qur'ān, the first part of which was written by Jalāl al-Dīn al-Maḥallī. His *Itqān fī 'ulūm al-Qur'ān* ("Mastery in the Sciences of the Qur'ān") is a well-known work on Qur'ānic exegesis." (Luebering, J.E. 2007) See my earlier reference to quotations

⁸ *naw'* means type. Suyūṭī names his chapters "types" with reference to the title his book. Each chapter is a discussion on a type of qur'ānic science. The encyclopaedic knowledge of the author on the subject of qur'ānic sciences can be gleaned from his 80 chapters, compared to contemporary works like nine chapters of *The Qur'an: A Beginner's Guide*, Doi's 24 chapters (Doi 1997) and 'Nadwī's 12 chapters (Nadwī 2003)

All these narrations are authentic. As for the narration of Ibn 'al-Ḍarīs that 'Ibn 'Umar hated that a man should say, "I have read (*qara 'tu*) the entire Qur'ān" [...] all these fall within the ambit of the recitation of which was already abrogated within the lifetime of the Prophet, God's salutations and peace be upon him. ('Asqalānī 1986: 680)

6. Clarifying Missing Data

6.1. The Ubiquitous "Others"

Earlier this paper mentioned how *A Beginner's Guide* tends to omit names and uses variable terms such as "others". At my count, the 267 page text contains 85 references to "others". For example:

Rather than God alternating between the use of the first person singular and the first person plural representing incoherence, others have argued that however disorienting this may be at a superficial perusal, these sudden shifts have an important literary and theological dimension. (Esack 2009: 88)

From reading the above the reader does not know who these "others" are, and is not provided with a reference to the facts mentioned. In the above example one of the scholars who could be referenced is Michael Sells, who wrote:

Finally, the Qur'ānic voice shifts continually. Sometimes the One God is referred to in the plural first person as "we"; sometimes in the third person as "your lord," "Allah," or "him/it"; and sometimes in the first person singular as "I." These sudden shifts can be disorientating at first, but they have an important literary and theological dimension. (Sells, 2002: 20)⁹

In fact, the close similarity between the Esack quote and the Sells quote may indicate that Sells could have been the primary reference to "others" in this matter.¹⁰ That Esack quotes Sells in his introduction further indicates that he holds Sells in esteem and that Sells may be one of the ubiquitous "others" (Esack 2009: 15).

These "others" do have identity but are not identified. Value may be added to the book were they to be identified and referenced.

6.2. Clarifying Missing Data – Incomplete Statements

In addition to leaving the names of individuals unmentioned or labelling them as "others" etc., there are places where the book omits pertinent details. In addition to omitting references for statements, especially controversial statements the reader might like to research further, the book also leaves

⁹ Michael Sells is the John Henry Barrows Professor of Islamic History and Literature; also in the Department of Comparative Literature at The University of Chicago Divinity School. He "and teaches in the areas of qur'anic studies; Sufism; Arabic and Islamic love poetry; mystical literature (Greek, Islamic, Christian, and Jewish); and religion and violence. His work on the Qur'an includes *Approaching the Qur'an: The Early Revelations* (2007) and *Qur'anic Studies Today* (2016), which he co-edited and to which he contributed."

¹⁰ Both quotes include "sudden shifts." Sells calls them, "disorientating at first" while Esack words them as, "disorienting ... at a superficial perusal"

unsaid principle information which is relevant to the discussion. Much value could be added if these missing gaps were attended to.

For example, the comment on masturbation seems odd and incomplete, and perhaps readers, especially Muslims, might like some details on the controversial yet scanty statement. It reads as follows:

Another example is that of masturbation; while three of the four recognized and dominant Sunni schools of law regard it as reprehensible, with the punishment being witnessing one's pregnant fingers giving birth on the Day of Judgment, a fourth school regards it as virtuous (Esack 2009: 205).

The fourth school [is] not named, nor is a reference given to a Sunnī book of *Fiqh* (jurisprudence) to enlighten the reader. To seek an answer, and for the sake of brevity, this paper refers to a contemporary book noted for providing an overview of the rulings of the four Sunnī schools, *'Al-Jāmi' li-'Aḥkām 'al-Fiqh 'alā 'al-Mazāhib 'al-'Arba'ah (Mālik wa 'al-Shāfi'ī wa 'Aḥmad wa 'Abī Ḥanīfah)*. It states:

A man masturbating with his hand is amongst that which contradicts wholesome nature, etiquette and good character. Mālik and 'al-Shāfi'ī say that it is *ḥarām* [forbidden]. 'Abū Ḥanīfah also says it to be *ḥaram* unless he fears for himself that he will commit *zinā* [sex outside of wedlock] or fears for his health; and he has neither wife nor slave-girl, and is unable to marry, then there is no harm upon him (Ḥammādah 2009: 541).

Shaykh 'Abdul Ḥakīm Ḥammādah only mentions the ruling of the three (Mālik, 'al-Shāfi'ī and 'Abū Ḥanīfah) that masturbation is forbidden. The exception for permission under certain circumstances which 'Abū Ḥanīfah allows, cannot be equated to, "a fourth school regards it as virtuous". As Ḥammādah has only mentioned three authorities, there remains the fourth school, the Ḥanbalī school of 'Aḥmad bin Ḥambal. 'Ibn Taymīyah¹¹ stated in this regard:

As for masturbation by the hand, it is *ḥarām* (forbidden) according to the overwhelming majority of the scholars. This is the more authentic of the two views within the school of 'Aḥmad. He who commits this should be censured. The second view is that it is *makrūh* (detestable) not forbidden ('Ibn Taymīyah 1987: 439)

Thus the school of 'Aḥmad is not the fourth school which regards masturbation as "virtuous". In other words, none of the four Sunnī schools regard masturbation as "virtuous". It remains unknown which school is the comment referencing. On the face of it, The comment seems to lack authenticity. It may be that the "virtuous" ruling is that of a jurist which was not officially endorsed by any of the four schools. Whatever the case, by omitting names and references, the reader is not fully guided as to what is being referred to.

¹¹ "Taqī al-Dīn Abū al-'Abbās Aḥmad ibn 'Abd al-Salām ibn 'Abd Allāh ibn Muḥammad ibn Taymiyyah, (born 1263, Harran, Mesopotamia—died September 26, 1328, Damascus, Syria), one of Islam's most forceful theologians, who, as a member of the Pietist? school founded by Ibn Ḥanbal, sought the return of the Islamic religion to its sources: the Qur'ān and the *sunnah*, revealed writing and the prophetic tradition. He is also the source of the Wahhābiyyah, a mid-18th-century traditionalist movement of Islam" (Laoust 1998)

According to the website of the University of Johannesburg, Esack qualified at an Islamic seminary, “B Th. Darsi Nizami (Jami’ah Aleemiyya Islamia (Karachi)”. He would be no stranger to these classical views of “the four recognized and dominant Sunni schools of law” and would know that attributing virtue to masturbation would be controversial, requiring a reference. Yet, his work does not name the school which contradicts what Muslim scholars uphold to be the classical Sunnī view on the topic.

To clarify, the paper does not seek to debate the Sunnī ruling on masturbation, but seeks to highlight but one example of the need to provide names and fuller details at the very least, and references and sources where possible. The unclear areas of this work detract from the quality of this product and create unnecessary suspicion in Sunnī circles. This can be avoided if the reader were offered the basis for the frequently unclear statements which appear in the book.

6.3. Clarifying Missing Data – What Does The Author Mean?

The book operates in an unresolvable dichotomy of walking a tight-rope of “objectively” examining the Qur’ān, while simultaneously presenting its author as that of a Muslim authority. While not explicit in the second half of the claim, the Muslim authority figure is subtly inculcated through devices such as the author’s Arabic name, to personal anecdotes referencing his “Muslimness”; to the extent that Chapter 2, “*The Qur’ān in the lives of Muslims*” may be renamed “*The Qur’ān in my life*”. For example:

As kids we looked forward to the day when any fellow learner completed his or her primer to commence with the Qur’an itself; the learner’s family had to provide small sweet packages to all his or her fellow learners (Esack 2009: 14).

My late mother, as any good Muslim housewife – we do not have an abundance of househusbands – commenced cooking by reciting a specific verse from the Qur’an in order to ensure that more people were able to enjoy the meal (ibid: 15)

However, as discussed before, Esack tends to present the “objectivity” in a cloud of anti-Muslim material, nuances and presentation. Sometimes the device of choice is simple ambiguity. These ambiguities may present a problem to the traditional Sunnī, accustomed to categorical writings or “I do not know.” Nevertheless, the critical Sunnī reader who notices these ambiguities is obliged to follow the dictum of ‘Abū Ḥanīfah, “We do not make *takfīr* [declare not Muslim / excommunicate] anyone through [mere] sin, nor do we negate anyone from faith” (Maghribī, A., 1995: 359). The Sunnī reader is obliged to take the author’s association with Islām (as indicated in his Chapter 2) as extant and interpret these ambiguities in a manner compatible with Islamic belief. Yet the intellectual gymnastics required to interpret certain passages, especially the ambiguous ones, as compatible with Muslim belief, can be quite a stretch at times. Compliance with Sunnī orthodoxy is not demanded, only simple clarity.

One such example of falling off the tight-rope into ambiguity is:

The fact that these *ayat* are often characterized by a later addition of “say” (*qul*) suggests that the entire section may have been preceded by the unarticulated instruction “say”. Muslims have always understood it in this manner. (Esack 2009: 90)

The above passage is extremely ambiguous and does not give an indication as to what is meant by “later addition”. A superficial reading of the text implies that “say” (*qul*) had been inserted into the Qur’ān. If that is what is being argued or put forth, it does not clarify by whom. By Muhammad? By

‘Uthmān or other Companions? The reader cannot be certain if an academic argument supporting the doctrine of *Tahrīf* (Interpolation of the Qur’ān) is being made or not. The passage is so unclear, yet it categorically states, “Muslims have always understood it in this manner.”

If, in theory, there is a critical but valid objection against the authenticity of the Qur’ān, the argument should be presented in a clear manner. Instead, in an attempt to create an aura of objectivity, ambiguity has been created. If the Muslim stance on their own sacred scripture is to be questioned at every turn, it should be done with clear facts, not ambiguous insinuations.

7. Decontextualizing the Qur’ān from Islam

The decontextualizing of the narration of ‘Abdullāh bin ‘Umar in regards the abrogated *‘āyāt* has been discussed before. Sunnī references were quoted, but the context omitted and a translation presented to create an argument contrary to the Sunnī view. It might further be argued that the Qur’ān itself is decontextualized from its position as the scripture of Islām.

Criticism is no licence to be unjust. The title of the book is “*The Qur’ān: A Beginners Guide*” not “Islam”. It does not aim to present the Islam to the beginner, with all its complexities and shades of opinion. Nevertheless, by decontextualizing the Qur’ān, and presenting it as an isolated text, independent of interaction with its traditional adherents – Sunnī or otherwise – the book is free to advance a modernist agenda, usually by innuendo. Thus by stripping the four schools of identifiable names, it is easy to imply that it is authoritatively held within the ambit of Sunnī Islam that masturbation can be a virtue. However, this assertion is preceded by first creating the impression that the Qur’ān is an isolated source of guidance and law existing in a vacuum to which any modernist idea may be applied. It is as if the entire legal codes of the Sunnīs, principles of deriving law, commentaries of the *mufasssīrūn* and companions of Muḥammad, and most importantly, the injunctions of the Prophet Muḥammad, have no relevance to the interpretation of the Qur’ān. Thus it states:

While these texts are sufficiently vague to apply to numerous vices, one still has the problem of defining vice in a particular context and the inescapable reality that context shapes one’s understanding of both the text and notions of morality and immorality (2009: 205)

Thus since the Qur’ān exists in the implied vacuum, any ruling based on any personal hermeneutic agenda should be equally valid as any traditional ruling.

This tool is not limited to sanctifying masturbation, but through innuendo, same-sex unions as well. Having prepared the groundwork for providing a modernist interpretation of the “vague” Qur’ān, it continues:

The Qur’an speaks approvingly of only two kinds of relationship for sexual fulfilment – that of marriage between a male and female and that of slave ownership – and is silent about other forms such as same-sex unions or masturbation.² (ibid: 210)

The quote ends with a reference to end-note 2, which reads:

Notwithstanding a legal principle that the basis of all things is permissibility, i.e., that something is permissible unless proven prohibited, by inference of the approval of these forms of union, most scholars have, in fact, drawn opinions condemning these forms of sexual fulfilment from the Qur'an (ibid: 265-66).

A critical examination of the two quotes would reveal two contradictory implications, aimed at convincing the beginner reader of the view that same-sex is condoned, or at the least, is worth putting on the table for discussion as permissible.

The first implication is that the Qur'ān is "silent" or as previously expressed, too "vague" in regards same-sex union. Also there are no further reference points to defer to, as the traditionalist would do. As such, the modernist is forced to apply his/her own mind, and cannot be said to be contradicting the "silent" and "vague" Qur'ān in this matter.

The second implication is drawn from a singular application of traditional jurisprudence, i.e. "something is permissible unless proven prohibited" (ibid). Ignoring the intricacies of the principles of Sunnī jurisprudence, the contradiction remains glaring. On the one hand, the Qur'ān is sufficiently "vague" to condone same-sex union, while on the other hand, guidance is required from a Sunnī juristic principle in order to condone same-sex union¹². The unversed reader is thus led to believe that this is the authentic Muslim application of a juristic principle, and is not alerted to the fact that juristic principles require an in-depth knowledge of various sciences and principles and the knowledge of which principle to apply in what context. Many volumes have been written on the science of Sunnī principles of jurisprudence, but in the limits of this paper the following statement of 'Abdul Mālik 'al-Juwaynī, the great Shāf'ī jurist, will have to suffice:¹³

Tarjīh [preference] is the overwhelming of one ruling over another in matters of interpretation....it is applied in to both apparent texts and narrations...The undeniable proof for applying *tarjīh* is drawn from the early generations and those who followed them... (Juwaynī, A.M., 1997: 175)

To list the principles and methodologies which Juwaynī lists and discusses in his one book alone, is not viable here. The point being, that a consistent treatment of traditional Sunnī positions is called for. They are either applicable or not.

This issue links up to the dichotomy discussed above. The presentation of being simultaneously objective and approaching the Qur'ān from a Muslim perspective becomes contradictory.

8. Conclusion

The Qur'ān: A Beginners Guide has gained widespread acceptance in the academic world and is used as a text book in several institutions. Nevertheless a revision may be advisable. The grey areas of unnamed figures and entities need to be attended to and these entities named and properly sourced.

¹² The beginner may note that this principle not explicitly mentioned in the Qur'ān.

¹³ Juwayni, Abu al-Maali al- (d. 1085) Famous Iranian Ash'ari theologian and political philosopher. Teacher of Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (d. 1111). (Oxford Islamic Studies, n.d.)

Pertinent facts are also omitted, which too should be fleshed out and referenced. The choice of words, material and nuances create an impression of anti-Sunnī bias, which may not have been intended and may be adjusted. Some of the translations presented require adjustment. The book, would not have gained its current academic stature if it had no value, nevertheless, a valuable product can be given even more value.

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